Christianity in the Graeco-Roman World

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CHRISTIANITY IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

Socio-political, philosophical, and religious interactions up to the Edict of Milan (CE 313)[1]

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In this essay I present a framework situating early Christianity within the geographical and cultural context of the Graeco-Roman world. I examine how Christianity interacted with the socio-political, philosophical, and religious forces in the Graeco-Roman world in the second and third centuries. How did these forces set the stage for developments within Christianity, especially its ideology (theology) in the second and third centuries? Firstly, I shall comment on Christianity in relation to Hellenistic-Roman "philosophy" and "religion." What exactly was the difference between philosophy and religion in this age, and how did Christianity relate to them? In a companion to early Christian *thought*, it is particularly worthwhile to reflect on the question of how Christianity appeared to the interested onlooker in antiquity: as a religion, or rather as a philosophy? Secondly, I will focus on the interaction of Christianity with the socio-political, philosophical, and religious forces, commenting on its organization, its ethics, its criticism of sacrifice and pagan idols, and its disparagement of mere sophistic rhetoric. Through this picture, I will portray Christianity as involved in a deep-seated rivalry with other religious and philosophical competitors on the market of antiquity. Thirdly and finally, I shall further illustrate this competition between Christianity and paganism by commenting on the antagonism between the followers of Christ and those of one of those other demigods of antiquity, Heracles.

Christianity, "philosophy," and "religion"

A note on the historiography of early Christianity

Before stipulating the relation between Christianity on the one hand, and the philosophy and religion of the Hellenistic-Roman environment on the other, it is important to clarify how I understand the Christian movement of the second and third centuries (the prime focus of the present volume) vis-à-vis its origins in the first century CE. To my mind, it is not fruitful to distinguish too strongly between the first century and the following second and third centuries; rather, one should regard these centuries as equally part of ante-Nicene Christianity. In the course of these three centuries, the partings of the ways between Christianity and Judaism gradually became visible. At the same time, Christianity was largely regarded as an illicit movement until the Edict of Milan in 313, when Christianity was first allowed religious freedom. It makes no sense to regard the Christianity of the first century as still "Palestinian," in contrast to the Christianity which became embedded throughout the Mediterranean world in the second and third centuries. First of all, together with Judea, Galilee, the homeland of Jesus of Nazareth, was a region of the Roman province of Syria, and, as we know from Josephus, the region itself saw major developments in the first centuries BCE and CE, when new cities such as Tiberias and Sepphoris were founded and were also partly inhabited by Greeks.[2] Secondly, it is – for that reason – scarcely surprising that "even in Galilee" Justus of Tiberias, the son of a first-century-CE Jewish faction leader, could entertain a lively interest in Socrates and Plato, and could be deemed by Josephus to be very proficient in Greek.[3] And thirdly, the Gospel of Mark emphasizes Jesus' activity among Jewish-Galilean settlements in the milieu of the Hellenistic cities and his journeys from Galilee into the Gentile territory of the Greek Decapolis, Phoenician Tyre and Sidon, and Roman Caesarea Philippi.[4] All these features suggest that it would be wrong to regard Galilee as an exception to the rule that the ancient world had become thoroughly Hellenized.[5] Moreover, already in the 30s and 40s of the first century CE, Christian communities existed outside Galilee and Judea in Syria, notably in Antioch, the third largest city of the Eastern Mediterranean. And in the 50s Christianity spread through other important cities there, with Paul founding communities in cities such as Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus.

This is important to realize, as the myth of a simple first-century Christianity as opposed to the Hellenized Christianity of the subsequent centuries is still prevalent. This seems to be the fruit of ideological historiographies of the nineteenth century, such as that of Adolf von Harnack, according to whom first-century Christianity was a moralized version of a simple-minded Judaism.[6] It was only in the second century, according to von Harnack, that Christianity became exposed to the full force of Hellenism. This led to the emergence of Christian Gnosticism, which combined Hellenistic philosophy with the Gnostic conviction that the world was the product not of the highest God, but of an ignorant or malevolent creator god. In attempting to express their convictions, the Christian Gnostics drew on Hellenistic philosophy, thus causing the first radical Hellenization of Christianity. The Hellenization of Christianity then became complete when the church fathers

of the second and third centuries, who saw themselves obliged to refute the Gnostic movement within Christianity, also drew on Hellenistic philosophy in their efforts to combat the Gnostics effectively. As a result, the simple, highly moral essence of the original form of Christianity became contaminated with Greek metaphysics. In this way, von Harnack succeeded in distinguishing an original, "biblical" Christianity from the later secular-Greek and early catholic encrustations, which were removed through the reforming endeavours of Augustine and Luther, which went back to the theology of Paul. Although the Protestant interests of this historiography are clearly visible (and though his understanding of Paul is highly questionable), von Harnack's paradigm has been very influential. Even Keith Hopkins, in his best-selling *A World Full of Gods: Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire* (1999), reinforces this interpretation: "Gnostics used a transcendental language, which united the thought-worlds of Judaism, Christianity and pagan Neo-Platonism. Gnostics in the second century moved Christianity out of Palestine, and out of the restricted world of Judaeo-Christian myth, on to a cosmic stage."[7] This is far from the historical truth, as first-century Christianity was already firmly embedded in the Mediterranean world. Even Judaism, from which Christianity only gradually parted, was not restricted to Palestine but dispersed throughout the ancient world, participating in, and interacting with, its culture.[8] Moreover, Palestine, too – as I already briefly suggested with reference to Galilee – was firmly part of the Hellenistic world.[9] As Christianity only gradually emancipated itself from Judaism during the first two centuries, mainly as a result of its distancing itself from the Jewish revolts against Rome in CE 66–70 and 132–5, it was in fact largely part of the phenomenon which we call Hellenistic Judaism. This started with the advent of Alexander the Great to the Ancient Near East, and constituted a pluriform and yet in many respects coherent movement which, in a variety of ways, had to come to terms with the Hellenistic movement and, at a later stage, Rome, too.[10] The exposure of Christianity to Hellenism is not an issue which only emerged in the second and third centuries, in a secondary development of Christianity; rather, Hellenism already preceded Christianity, inasmuch as Judaism, of which Christianity was part, had already been interacting with Hellenism for over three centuries.

Christianity is a profoundly Jewish movement of the Hellenistic-Roman era. The designation "Christianity" is still very rare in the New Testament, and the result of the outsiders' perspective of the Romans.[11] Moreover, it is early Christianity, and not post-CE-70 rabbinical Judaism, which preserved the Septuagint, the writings of Philo of Alexandria and Josephus, as well as the so-called Jewish pseudepigrapha.[12] And like the Judaism of the Hellenistic-Roman period, it was in interaction with its Graeco-Roman environment.

For all these reasons, I shall closely link the Christianity of the second and third centuries with its manifestation in the first century and regard it as a continuum, uninterrupted by a new cultural epoch, rather than viewing it from a Harnackian perspective of progress, degeneration, and (a need for) reformation. First-century Christianity does not enjoy a separate standing as "biblical." Even the decision about what should be regarded as the authoritative "New Testament writings" was an organic

process which spanned the first centuries: the four Gospels and the Pauline Epistles were recognized as authoritative around 150.

"Religion" and "philosophy" in antiquity

The question I shall address now is how, in the first three centuries, Christianity presented itself within the Graeco-Roman world. Was it a (new) religion, or rather a philosophy? This question, awkward as it seems in the ears of those used to the fixed form of modern definitions of religion and philosophy, is essential for us to understand the way in which early Christian thought was communicated on the religious market of antiquity. This market was not just "religious" in the modern sense, but rather religio-philosophical. This is also clear when one looks at the ancient understanding of "religion," "superstition," "philosophy," and "atheism," taking care that our interpretation is not influenced by an anachronistic understanding. According to particular ancient Jewish, early Christian, and ancient philosophical perspectives, Judaism and Christianity are philosophical movements, and pagan religion is regarded as providing access to "ancient" wisdom as a source for philosophy.[13]

This observation is confirmed by lexicographical and conceptual analysis of the term "religion" in recent research that questions a modern, anachronistic definition of "religion" and "philosophy" when applied to antiquity. Jan Bremmer, for instance, asks himself,

> What does the term "religion" mean and what does that meaning imply for a contemporary study of Greek religion? The first part of this question may occasion surprise, but the present meaning of religion is the outcome of a long process. ... In the time of Cicero, Lucretius and Virgil, *religio* was not equivalent to our notion of "religion" but contained a strong ritualistic aspect and was often connected with active worship according to the rules.[14]

Against this background, Paul's definition of Christianity (although he still does not use that term) as "a logical [i.e., non-ritualistic] way of worshipping God" (Rom. 12:1–2), which is characterized by ethical deliberations, is most interesting. Through its stress on "logical" worship, Christianity is presented more in terms of a(n) (ethical) philosophy, and not as a ritualistic religion. The same holds true for Christ's view in the Gospel of John that true worship no longer consists in worshipping God in accordance with ancestral Samaritan or Jewish custom, in temples either on Mt Gerizim or in Jerusalem: "the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. ... God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:20–24).[15] Temple worship, which is of a locative and ritualistic nature, is replaced with the worship of God through the rather philosophical medium of spirit and truth. As we shall see, this view is manifest in Origen's criticism of the pagan philosopher Celsus, who still embraces a locative understanding of religion.

Consequently, we should exercise caution in using the term "religion," as Bremmer reminds us: "the use of the term 'religion' for certain Greek ideas and practices is

an etic term, which reflects the observer's point of view, not that of the actor: the Greeks themselves did not yet have a term for 'religion'."[16] If we apply not an etic (general, modern, "objective") but an emic perspective, describing early Christianity in terms of its internal elements and their functioning in the ancient world at large, Christianity is not so much a religion, in the Graeco-Roman sense of the word, but rather a philosophy. This is rightly highlighted by Loveday Alexander, who follows the now classic views on Christianity put forward by Arthur Darby Nock in the 1930s:

> To the casual pagan observer the activities of the average synagogue or church would look more like the activities of a school than anything else. Teaching or preaching, moral exhortation, and the exegesis of canonical texts are activities associated in the ancient world with philosophy, not religion.[17]

These developments substantiate Nietzsche's intuitive view of early Christianity as a particular type of Graeco-Roman philosophy, as "Platonismus *für's Volk*."

At the same time, what is called "ancient philosophy" should not be understood to be devoid of religion. Classicists such as David Sedley have hinted at the religious nature of ancient philosophy. This is shown in the following analysis, which Sedley puts forward in his work on the allegiance of ancient philosophers to a particular founding figure:

> In the Graeco-Roman world, specially during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, what gives philosophical movements their cohesion and identity is less a disinterested common quest for the truth than a virtually religious commitment to the authority of a founder figure.[18]

Philosophy has certain "religious" overtones. The commitment to a particular founder figure manifests itself in reverence for his texts:

> For the vast majority of thinkers in this period ... , the revered text was either that of Plato, commonly regarded as divine, or of course the Old and/or New Testament, which were taken to represent, most prominently, the authority of Moses and St Paul, respectively.[19]

These remarks could be further supported with references to the representation of Plato as divine. In Platonism in antiquity, Plato came to be regarded as a divine man (*vir divinus*), and his writings as divine scriptures (*scripta divinitus*: Cicero, *On the Orator* 1.49, 3.15; *Laws* 1.15, 2.14, 3.1). Such views are matched by similar stories about the divine gift of Plato's philosophy (Cicero), legendary and miraculous tales about Plato's birth under the protection of Apollo (Plutarch, Apuleius, Diogenes Laertius), and several historiographies that link Plato's philosophy with the ancient wisdom of the East, including that of Moses (Numenius).[20]

It is highly relevant to note that Plato was not accorded high status because he was a philosopher, but because his philosophy was considered to confer access to ancient

wisdom. This is stressed by Michael Frede in his work on the figure of the philosopher in antiquity:

> One did not primarily think that Plato had been such an excellent philosopher that he must have known the truth; one thought, rather ... that there was an ancient wisdom that Plato, being the person he was and the excellent philosopher he was, had access to. ... In the light of this, Plato's writings came to have a status rather like Scripture.[21]

The religious features of ancient philosophy are also visible in the way philosophy and the religious phenomenon of the oracles were brought together. From the second century CE, oracles were regarded as a source of philosophical reflection. One example of this is provided by the so-called *Chaldean Oracles*, which contain doctrines that are based upon Platonic and Pythagorean speculation, cult, and magic.[22] Another example is the oracles of Apollo at Claros, which are also of a philosophical nature.[23] Reference to Plato's writings, with the aim of reconstructing the ancient wisdom, and philosophical interpretation of the oracles could coexist and reinforce one another. As Frede puts it:

> One believed that Plato's writings were merely a means toward attaining the truth that, once attained, would make reference to Plato redundant. One could even believe this if, in reconstructing the true philosophy, one also relied, for instance, on the Chaldean Oracles, which one took to be divinely inspired.[24]

A similar role to that of oracles is played by hymns. They too are both "religious" and applied by philosophers to express their philosophical reflections on the gods. This practice already existed in the *Hymn to Zeus* written by the third century BCE Stoic philosopher Cleanthes, and the genre, continued to be used.[25] This is clearly related to the remarkable phenomenon that important philosophers, such as the first-century-CE Middle Platonist Plutarch, were at the same time priests in a particular cult. Plutarch was a priest of Apollo at Delphi.

Finally, the religious nature of philosophy is also revealed in the practice of *converting* to philosophy.[26] The role of conversion in the lives of ancient philosophers proves very important and also attests to the close resemblance between ancient philosophy and Christianity. Philostratus, for instance, relates that the sophist Isaeus "had devoted the period of his early youth to pleasure. ... But when he attained manhood he so transformed himself as to be thought to have become another person," indicating that "all pleasures are a shadow and a dream."[27] Similar conversion stories are found in Dio Chrysostom, Lucian, Diogenes Laertius, Maximus of Tyre, and Galen.[28] They also employ the vocabulary of conversion, such as the terms *epistrophè*, *conversio*, and *metanoia*. This vocabulary is identical with that of Christians, both in the New Testament writings and in authors such as Justin Martyr.[29]

Having looked briefly at the philosophical self-portrayal of Christianity, already by Paul and John, and at religious features of ancient philosophy, we are in a better position to appreciate how early Christian thought was contextualized in, and interacted with, the Graeco-Roman world. We shall now study this interaction in more detail, and differentiate interactions with the socio-political, philosophical, and religious forces which Christianity entered into competition with.

Christianity in competition

Christianity's organization: interaction with the socio-political forces

The blending of "religion" and "philosophy" in Christianity, Judaism, and pagan philosophy is facilitated by the sociological structure of the religio-philosophical market of antiquity. Apart from the State, and the State-controlled civic religion, over which the emperor presided as its *pontifex maximus*, religio-philosophical life took place in the so-called "private," voluntary associations and the philosophical "schools."[30] Judaism, Christianity, and pagan philosophy all find their natural habitat in the same types of networks, those of associations and (pseudo-) schools whose vague boundaries provided ample room for competition, as long as public order was maintained. If not, the State did not hesitate to intervene, as the frequent expulsions from Rome of Jews, philosophers, and adherents of mystery cults illustrate. But outside Rome, too, in the more distant regions of the empire, private associations could be suppressed, as the correspondence between Trajan and Pliny the Younger shows. Pliny, Trajan's direct representative in the province of Bithynia-Pontus (*c.* CE 110–12), writes to the emperor about an "edict, issued on your instructions, which banned all *hetaeriae*," i.e. all (political) societies and (religious) brotherhoods and fraternities.[31] As far as Judaism was concerned, its adherents were reminded not only of the need to respect the public order, for which the State was responsible, but also, more specially, "not to set at nought the beliefs about the gods held by other peoples but to keep their own laws."[32] This, as we shall see, increasingly caused a problem for Christianity, as it actively engaged in criticizing ancestral religious customs, whether Jewish or pagan. The more Christianity was distinguished from Judaism, the more it became vulnerable as a new association which did not respect existing religious traditions.

An important common denominator between these associations is that, probably with the exception of the synagogue, they organized their meetings around a meal, followed by a symposium. Jews did not necessarily share a meal in their synagogues because of differing views on ritual purity. Yet Christians did, and Paul's description of the way in which the Christian community in Corinth gathered and celebrated the meal of the Lord (see 1 Cor. 11:17–34) closely resembles the meal practices of the associations.[33]

The model of the association is certainly very fruitful for understanding early Christianity's social structures, but it has its limitations and needs to be supplemented with the model of the philosophical school, which only partly overlaps with that

of the associations. This was already noted by Alexander in her exploratory work on Christianity as a philosophical school. In this she adduces the remarks by the second-century philosopher and physician Galen, who explicitly referred to Judaism and Christianity as "the schools of Moses and Christ." According to Alexander, the associations only partly account for the social outlook of Christianity:

> In terms of social structure ... , the school has distinct advantages over the more familiar models of the household or the association, neither of which normally produces literature, or sees itself as part of a worldwide movement: there are a number of potentially valuable comparisons to be made in this area.[34]

Alexander herself has made a further contribution to this research by showing that the way in which authorities are cited in Paul's writings is very similar to the use of citations in the Hellenistic schools.[35] This model of the school is also fruitful because, whereas associations often used buildings of their own, neither philosophers nor Christians had such buildings. The latter could meet out-of-doors, but tended to use houses of wealthy Christians, shops, workshops, hired dining rooms, storehouses, or baths for their meetings. The earliest purpose-built churches probably date from the third century.[36] The pagan philosopher Porphyry (234 to c. 305), for instance, writes: "Moreover the Christians also imitate the building of temples by building the greatest houses in which they gather for prayer, although nothing prevents them from doing this in their own houses, since God clearly hears from everywhere."[37] This passage shows that although, as Porphyry acknowledges, Christians had no religious need for specific holy places and could use their own houses, they did in fact build special meeting-places in the third century. This is confirmed by excavations of churches in Dura Europos and Qirqbize in Belus, to the East of Antioch.[38]

Both models, that of the associations and that of the schools, are applied by second-century Christians such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian. They offer some of the earliest reflections about how Christianity was to be socially organized. Justin's Christianity takes the form of a school.[39] And Tertullian, despite his much quoted phrase "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?,"[40] explicitly compares his allegiance to Christ with that of the philosophers to Pythagoras, Socrates, or Plato.[41] In his *Apology*, however, Tertullian employs the other organizational model, urging his contemporaries to grant Christians the rights of an association.[42]

The self-understanding of Christianity as a philosophical school is not mirrored only by Galen's depiction of Christianity as the school of Christ. Plotinus, too, in his third-century criticism of Christian Gnosticism, likewise portrays it not as a religion, but a philosophical movement in which Plato is misunderstood.[43] This is not to say, however, that Christianity was a formal, organized, institutionalized school. In addition to the formal schools, there were a plethora of other, less formal schools. As Tiziano Dorandi puts it in his overview of the organization and structure of the philosophical schools:

> Beside this kind of organized and institutionalized school (*scholai, diatribai*), there were also groups of people who got together to practise philosophy in an apparently less rigidly structured form, which could be defined as a "pseudo-school" or, better, "philosophical tendency" (*agōgai* or *haereseis*).[44]

Apart from the terminology of schools and associations, Christianity, starting with Paul, also defines itself in what we might call para-political language as "the assembly of God," the *ekklèsia tou theou*. Unfortunately this term is commonly mistranslated, in idiosyncratic language only applicable to Christianity, as "the church of God." There is reason to believe, however, that Paul, who employs the phrase frequently, deliberately paralleled the Christian assembly, "the assembly of God," with the political assembly of the Greek cities, most explicitly so in his address to the Christian community of Corinth: "To the assembly of God that is in Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1). Although "assembly" is the term in the Septuagint which depicts the Jewish congregation, the phrase "assembly of God" occurs only once and does not seem to be the exemplar on which Paul modelled his depiction of the Christian congregation.[45]

Rather, as the addresses of the Corinthian correspondence make particularly clear, "the assembly of God that is in Corinth" offers an alternative for the political assembly of Corinthians. It is, I believe, no mere word play on the double meaning of *ekklèsia* (as the political assembly and as "the Church") when Origen, following Paul, contrasts the Christian and the political assembly in this way. Rather it is an important statement of Christian self-understanding which offers an interesting insight into how Christianity defines itself vis-à-vis the political forces of its time. According to Origen,

> everywhere in the world in order that men might be converted and reformed He [i.e. God] made the gospel of Jesus to be successful, and caused assemblies ("churches") to exist in political opposition to the assemblies (*genesthai pantachou ekklèsias antipoliteuomenas ekklèsiais*) of superstitious, licentious, and unrighteous men. For such is the character of the crowds who everywhere constitute *the assemblies of the cities*. And *the assemblies of God* which have been taught by Christ, when compared with *the assemblies of the people* where they live, are "as lights in the world." ... The *assembly of God*, say, at Athens is meek and quiet, since it desires to please God. But *the assembly of the Athenians* is riotous and in no way comparable to *the assembly of God* there. You may say the same of *the assembly of God at Corinth* and *the assembly of the people of the Corinthians*, and of *the assembly of God*, say, at Alexandria and *the assembly of the people of Alexandria*. If the man who hears this has an open mind, and examines the facts with a desire to find out the truth, he will be amazed at the one who both planned and had the power to carry into effect the establishment of *the assemblies of God* in all places, living beside *the assemblies of the people* in each city. And so also, if you compare *the council of the assembly of God* with the council in each city, you may, in the future, find

> that some council members of the assemblies [of the Church] are worthy, if there exists a city of God in the universe, to hold public office in it.
> (Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.29–30)[46]

Here, and elsewhere, Origen, following Paul, draws the full consequences of the view that Christianity is an assembly of God, parallel to the political assembly of the Greek cities of the ancient world.[47] In Paul's understanding, Christianity is not an apolitical organization but offers a better alternative, although it does certainly not envisage the subversion of the existing political authorities: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1). Yet Paul's language is deliberately cast in political terminology, thus rendering the "church," "the assembly of God," a para-political institution; the Christian assembly is deliberately styled as an alternative to the normal, political assemblies. This is confirmed by the fact Paul also describes this assembly in terms of an organic body, in the same way as the State was described as a coherent body in Graeco-Roman authors (1 Cor. 12:12–27).[48] Moreover, in line with his depiction of the Christian community as "the assembly of God," Paul speaks of the citizenship of Christians, not of the earthly cities, but a citizenship which is of a heavenly nature. Instead of setting their mind on earthly things, Christians possess a citizenship which is in heaven (Phil. 3:20), and are consequently encouraged to live as free citizens of that heavenly government (Phil. 1:27). Paul's understanding of the Christian assembly and the heavenly citizenship it implies is in fact very similar to the Stoic notion of the cosmic city. This, too, is expressed in political language, and entails the idea that God, the cosmos, and the Stoic sages constitute a cosmic city, which is distinct from a particular political citizenship.[49] It is this notion that Origen seems playfully to allude to when he refers to the existence of a city of God "in the universe." Like the Stoics, Paul and Origen cling to the ideal of dual-citizenship: the exercise of citizenship in heaven, accessible through the assemblies of God on earth, as well as the concomitant submission to the governing authorities that have been instituted by God.

I have one final remark with regard to the way in which early Christians gathered. From a fairly early stage, their place of gathering seems to have been oriented towards the sun. This seems to be implied already in Pliny's description of their habit of meeting "regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god."[50] The orientation to the light is very understandable, given the repeated association of Christ with the light in the New Testament writings. Especially the identification of Christ with "the true light which enlightens everyone" (John 1:9) may have given rise to this practice.[51]

Christianity's ethical tenor: philosophical ethics and popular myths – interaction with philosophical and religious forces

As we have already seen, in Paul's definition of Christianity as "a logical [i.e., non-ritualistic] way of worshipping God" (Rom. 12:1–2) which involves firm ethical

deliberations, Christianity is presented as a fully ethical philosophy and not as a ritualistic religion. This logical worship of God, in which the human mind is renewed, enables man to "discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."[52] This strong ethical tenor of the Christian religion is in marked contrast with the highly mythologically charged nature of pagan popular cults. As we have seen, Graeco-Roman religion itself "was not equivalent to our notion of 'religion' but contained a strong ritualistic aspect."[53] And, as Peter Brunt has pointed out with regard to the pagan religious cults: "The cults themselves comprised no moral teaching."[54] Christianity thus competed with philosophical ethics on the one hand, and on the other hand religio-mythological cults which were devoid of ethics. This can be illustrated by focusing on an important ethical notion such as philanthropy. According to (Pseudo-)Paul's letter to Titus, who is at that moment on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5), with the birth of Christ mankind was challenged to end the era of human disobedience and to be saved, precisely because God's philanthropy manifested itself:

> We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and philanthropy of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us.
>
> (Titus 3:3–5)

It is no coincidence that Paul writes about the manifestation of God's philanthropy in this letter to Crete, as, according to Diodorus of Sicily, a large number of Greek gods had their origin in Crete and extended their *philanthropy* to the Cretans;[55] from there they set out "to visit many regions of the inhabited world, conferring benefactions upon the races of men."[56] In particular, the Cretan cults and myths included the cult of Zeus. As B. C. Dietrich summarizes:

> Legend placed his birth in a Cretan cave on Mt. Ida or Dicte (Psychro). He also died in Crete, and from Hellenistic times his tomb was shown on the island (Diodorus Siculus 3.61.2), prompting Callimachus's outburst that all Cretans are liars (*Hymn* 1.8).[57]

Callimachus's criticism shows the tension which arose between philosophy and mythology. It seems as though Paul deliberately challenges the view that the gods of the myths were indeed philanthropic, as their behaviour was rather an incitement to foolishness, disobedience, and subjection to passions and pleasures, instead of acting as a role-model for philanthropy. Paul's attitude is typical of the way in which Christians interacted with the religious forces of that time, and we shall explore this issue further in the final section, in which Christ and Heracles are compared. Callimachus's philosophical disapproval of the Cretans' belief in the death of Zeus also became a topic in Christian authors. Christians borrowed arguments from the philosophers to drive a wedge between philosophy and mythological religion. The pagan philosopher Celsus,

however, became so angered by these Christian polemics that he complained, as Origen reports, that "we ridicule those who worship Zeus because his tomb is shown in Crete, without knowing how and why the Cretans do this."[58] Celsus's reaction is proof not only that Christians did interact with the pagans, but also that this interaction was a two-way process.

Although Christians would strongly object to the claim of the gods' philanthropy as professed in the myths, they did agree with many of the philosophical schools in their views on the philanthropic nature of God. The Platonists agreed with the Stoics that God is philanthropic and beneficent, and they both disagreed with the Epicureans, according to whom the gods take no heed of this cosmos. The Platonist philosopher Plutarch, for instance, grants that the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus is right to fight "especially against Epicurus and against those who do away with providence," and regards Stoics and Platonists like himself as drawing on the same conception of the gods "in thinking of them as beneficent and philanthropic." Like Chrysippus, Plutarch criticizes Epicurus for believing that the gods are not provident and philanthropic.[59] Plutarch thus clearly sides with the Stoics against the Epicureans, because the former say "that God is preconceived and conceived to be not only immortal and blessed but also philanthropic."[60] When Christianity entered the ancient world with its own propagation of God's philanthropy, the philosophical forces which it met were rather diverse and formed changing allegiances, depending on the topic discussed. Even despite his basic agreement with the Stoics on God's philanthropy, Plutarch complains that the Stoics' views were inconsistent and in certain respects as absurd as those of the Epicureans.[61] Plutarch criticizes Chrysippus, for instance, because *the deeds* which Chrysippus imputes to God are sometimes harsh, barbarous, and "Galatian," although his *epithets* for God are always fair and philanthropic.[62] Plutarch is an ardent proponent of the idea of God's philanthropy, and strongly emphasizes that it is God's nature to bestow favour and give assistance, and that it is not his nature to be angry and do harm.[63] This conviction is also found in other philosophers.[64]

Among early Christians, the topic of God's philanthropy was also emphasized in the growing internal polemics against the Gnostics, who denied the beneficent providence and philanthropy of the creator God. In an anti-Marcionite chapter of his *Christ the Educator*, Clement of Alexandria reminds his readers of

> the supreme proof God has given of his *philanthropy*, in that *he has become man*. ... Out of the excess of his *philanthropy*, he has himself experienced the sufferings which are common to every *man* by his nature.
>
> (Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator* 1.8.62)

In line with Paul's view, God becoming man is seen as the most radical manifestation of his love of man. This radical view on God's philanthropy is not the only difference between Christians and pagan philosophers. Despite the similarities mentioned above, the Graeco-Roman notion of philanthropy retained a very elitist character, which is

particularly obvious in two aspects. Philanthropy was thought of as primarily practised by the king (although, admittedly, the king served as an exemplary model), and it was often restricted in its application to the worthy, the good, and the noble, whereas Christianity was concerned with the needy and the poor.[65]

The same radicalism of Christian ethics can be observed in the thorough way the notion of assimilation to God was propagated by Christians. The notion arose in Platonism, where Plato's definition of assimilating to God as "becoming righteous and holy, with wisdom" was, from the first century BCE on, construed as the goal of ethics.[66] This Platonic definition was so powerful that it was appropriated not only by Stoics, but also by Jews and Christians. The latter two, however, considerably widened access to the process of assimilation to God. Whereas many philosophers restricted this access to those involved in the contemplative life, according to Jews such as Philo of Alexandria, and early Christians, one could also pursue assimilation to God in an active life in the world, through virtue.[67]

Both in its extensive reflections on God's philanthropy and in its thorough appropriation of the Platonic doctrine of assimilation to God as the model of righteousness and holiness, Christianity showed itself radically committed to an ethical life. In the brief pagan restoration under emperor Julian (361–3) some decades after Constantine's rule, this was recognized even by the pagan rulership, as Julian's letter to a pagan high-priest in Galatia shows.[68] Contrasting pagan Hellenic religion with that of Judaism and Christianity, Julian emphasizes that "it is disgraceful that, when *no Jew ever has to beg*, and the impious Galilaeans support *not only their own poor but ours as well*, all men see that our people lack aid from us."[69] To change this, Julian argues that Homer's myths contain already clear incitements to philanthropy.

Criticism of pagan sacrifice, idols, and polytheism

Christianity's propagation of an ethical–logical religion accords well with its criticism of ritualistic religion. On the one hand, this concerns its relation to the Jewish temple and its cult. On the other hand, and perhaps even more strongly, this criticism also relates to the sacrifices of the pagan cults, the idols displayed in these cults, and the many gods to which they refer. This is not to say that Christianity's espousal of non-sacrificial and monotheistic religion was without analogy in the Graeco-Roman world. As we know, particular strands of Greek philosophy, such as those of Pythagoras and Empedocles, were known for their criticism of animal sacrifices (Diogenes Laertius, Sextus Empiricus). Moreover, Plato and Platonic philosophers such as Plutarch and notably Porphyry (*On Abstinence from Killing Animals*) held critical views on sacrifices.[70] As regards monotheism, it has now come to be recognized that this was also a strong trend within pagan philosophy, as Athanassiadi and Frede's programmatic collective volume on pagan monotheism (1999) has shown. They argue against the misconception "that in the Graeco-Roman world ... Christianity, in the tradition of Jewish monotheism, succeeded in replacing invariably polytheistic systems of religious belief with a monotheistic creed." Rather, "monotheism was increasingly widespread by the time of late antiquity" and "the success of Christianity in that world

[should be attributed] to its advocacy of a way of seeing things, of thinking and acting, which it shared with a growing number of pagans."[71] Christianity was part of a broader movement of growing monotheism, which encompassed the mainstream philosophies.

Yet, within this general monotheism, differing views were present, and especially the relation between monotheism and civic religion was perceived differently in Christianity and in paganism. According to the pagan Roman historian of religion, Varro, religion could be differentiated into three different types: (1) philosophical religion, which is monotheistic and without cult images; (2) mythical religion, which is reprehensible from a philosophical perspective; and (3) civic religion, which does have images and is advocated by the State.[72] This brings to light an important divergence between pagan philosophers and Christians. As Brunt has indicated, according to pagans such as Varro, "'the natural theology' of philosophers, even if it might present a truer conception of the divine than that commonly entertained, was superfluous for the masses. It was therefore to be confined to the schools, not ventilated in the forum."[73] This attitude seems to differ greatly from Christian missionary activities, which did ventilate such views in public. Christians recognized that their monotheism was preceded by Plato, but also pointed out his limitations; they referred to the passage in Plato's *Timaeus* (28c) where Plato considers it possible to discover the one God, the "Maker and Father of this universe," but impossible to instil this monotheistic insight into the masses.[74] Plato's assertion became much debated between philosophers and Christians, as Philo, Josephus, Justin, Celsus, and Origen indicate. Jews and Christians took Plato's statement and turned it against paganism, in favour of the Jewish-Christian "true philosophy" which, they claimed, was embraced by the masses, too. Again, it was Christianity's popularizing radicalism which distinguished it from ancient philosophy.

The same holds true for Christianity's identity as a non-sacrificial religion. Although there were pagan precursors, as has just been indicated, the combination of Jewish and Greek-philosophical anti-sacrificial traditions in Christianity reinforced its criticism to such an unprecedented degree that it is justifiable to label this development a revolution.[75] Already at the beginning of the second century CE, pagans complained that the meat of sacrificed animals was not in demand.[76] Both vis-à-vis Judaism and paganism, Christianity entailed "the end of sacrifice."[77]

The early Christians' disapproval of sacrifice and the polytheistic worship of idols went together with a deep sense of developing a universal religion, which was no longer dependent on the concepts of holy places and religious customs which differed from place to place and were, in this sense, ethnically determined. This is exactly the criticism which ancient philosophers such as Celsus levelled against Christianity. According to Origen's reply, the pagan cults "are localized in a particular place."[78] Celsus's criticism, however, is that Christians pay no heed to such places. According to Celsus, at least the Jews "behave like the rest of mankind, because each nation follows its traditional customs. ... In fact, the practices done by each nation are right when they are done in the way that pleases the [divine] overseers; and it is impious to abandon the customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning."[79] Origen, however, from his universalistic perspective, questions the view that "because

of the overseers that have been allotted to the parts of the earth the practice done by each nation is right."[80]

According to Origen, Celsus's view would imply that "piety will not be divine by nature, but a matter of arbitrary arrangement and opinion";[81] in this way, "piety and holiness and righteousness are reckoned to be relative, so that one and the same thing is pious and impious under differing conditions and laws."[82] Quite the contrary view should be taken, Origen asserts:

> *it is pious* to break customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning and to adopt better and more divine laws given us by Jesus, as the most powerful being, "delivering us from this present evil world" (Gal. 1:4), and from "the rulers of this world who are coming to nought" (1 Cor. 2:6).
>
> (Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.32)

In this way Origen expresses a universal, non-localized Christian view which we have already identified in Paul's exhortation to logical worship, and in John's plea for worshipping God, not in specific holy places, but in spirit and truth.[83] It is this fundamental criticism of ancestral religious customs which causes problems for Christianity, as it is not confined to the Christian "school," but ventilated in the forum. Unlike Judaism, which was tolerated as long as it did not set "at nought the belief about the gods held by other peoples,"[84] and which was first and foremost an ethnic religion, Christianity spoke out, also outside its meeting places, and offered full membership to everybody, regardless of ethnic background, in "the assembly of God." For this reason, Christianity increasingly differentiated itself from Judaism, all the more when it declined to participate in the Jewish revolts against Rome in 66–70 and 132–5. This abstinence, however, was not appreciated. It was its outspoken public criticism of religious customs that placed Christianity under suspicion. The problem for the Christians was that their attitude brought them close to an atheistic philosophy. Christianity's non-ritual character and Christians' refusal to participate in the rites of pagan religion led pagans to consider the Christian movement as "atheism."[85] Moreover, the Christians' attitude differed notably from that of pagan "atheists,"[86] insofar as the latter at least continued to participate in the cults.[87] Other philosophers, too, such as Cicero and Celsus, though they were critical of the cults to some extent, had no problem with outward conformity. In this respect, the Christian movement differed greatly from the pagan philosophies.

Criticism of Sophistic rhetoric – interaction with the contemporary movement of the Second Sophistic

Christianity not only interacted with the socio-political, philosophical, and religious forces of the time, but was also confronted with the movement known as the Second Sophistic.[88] Its ideas revolved around the basic conviction that truth is secondary to rhetorical presentation, and that speakers should have the ability to improvise, to invent new themes, to impress their audience with their strong bodily presence and, in

so doing, to earn praise, honour, and fame. Sophists manifest themselves everywhere. Apart from their declamation and competitions in houses, lecture halls, libraries, council-chambers, and theatres, they, as Ewen Bowie summarizes, "were influential in their cities and even provinces, intervening to check civic disorder or inter-city rivalry ... , or dispatched as envoys to congratulate emperors on their accession or to win or secure privileges for their cities (and often themselves)."[89] The philosopher Plutarch greatly dislikes them. In his view, "public speakers and sophists ... are led on by repute and ambition ... to competition in excess of what is best for them."[90] Plutarch is particularly concerned about the pseudo-learned, sophistic after-dinner disputations, "which have as their goal an ostentatious or stirring rivalry."[91] He fears discussions that deteriorate "into an unpleasant squabble or a contest in sophistry" and into the type of strife going on in the *ekklèsia*, the political assembly.[92] No wonder then that this fashionable movement also exerts its influence within the Christian assembly and here, too, determines the standards for what is considered to be appropriate rhetoric. Such a situation occurs in the Christian assembly of Corinth, and it is in this context that Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Consider your own call, brothers: not many of you were wise by common human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor. 1:26). Often these words are taken to point to the low-class background of the first Christians. Yet, the "wise," "powerful" and "those of noble birth" constitute a typical sophistic audience, so that Paul is in fact combating the influence of the Sophistic movement in the Corinthian Christian assembly.[93] His criticism of "the wisdom of the world" and his plea for "the wisdom of God" in this context (1 Cor. 1–4) do not reflect an anti-philosophical attitude. Rather, this differentiation between two types of wisdom is characteristic of the philosophical criticism of the Second Sophistic, and is also found in philosophers such as Dio Chrysostom and Plutarch.[94]

Paul's anti-sophistic strategy was recognized and taken up by Christians such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen. The latter counters Celsus's objection that the Christians "want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children."[95] This view, Origen suggests, derives from a misunderstanding of Paul:

> It is probably the words written by Paul in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, where he is addressing Greeks who prided themselves on Greek wisdom, which have led some people to imagine that the Gospel does not want wise men. But let the man who imagines this understand that the passage is an attack upon bad men, saying that they are not wise concerning intelligible, invisible, and eternal things, but only interest themselves in things of sense, and that because they put everything into this last category, they become wise men of the world.
>
> (Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.38)[96]

As Henry Chadwick notes, "Celsus shuts his eyes to the fact of a rational Christian theology. There is an emotional heat apparent in his dogged insistence on the anti-

cultural nature of Christianity."[97] Celsus's underestimation of Christianity can also be proven wrong by other pagan reports. In his description of the composition of Christianity in the province of Bithynia-Pontus at the beginning of the second century, Pliny remarks that the Christian movement consists of "a great many individuals of every age *and class* (*omnis ordinis*), both men and women."[98] The least one can say is, as Origen does, that the higher, intellectual classes are not under-represented in Christianity:

> It was inevitable that in the great number of people overcome by the word [of God], because there are many more vulgar and illiterate people than those who have been trained in rational thinking, the former class should far outnumber the more intelligent. But as Celsus did not want to recognize this fact, he thinks that the philanthropy shown by the word of God, which even extends to every soul from the rising of the sun, is vulgar, and that it is successful only among the uneducated because of its vulgarity and utter illiteracy. Yet not even Celsus asserts that only vulgar people have been converted by the gospel to follow the religion of Jesus; for he admits that among them there are some moderate, reasonable, and intelligent people who readily interpret allegorically. (Origen, Against Celsus 1.27)

Against Celsus's charge that Christianity is anti-cultural, Origen reveals his own intention to let "the assembly of Christians" consist of "the cleverer and sharper minds because they are able to understand the explanation of problems and of the hidden truths set forth in the law, the prophets, and the gospels."[99] Consequently, he attempts "to convert philosophers to Christianity."[100] This clearly underlines the competitive nature of Christianity, for which there are so many indications.

Christianity's engagement in cosmological and historiographical debates

Cosmology

Although important instances have been given of Christianity engaging in competition with the socio-political, religious, and philosophical forces, this overview is not exhaustive. The field of cosmology, the view on the origins, constitution, and future of the cosmos, also provided a setting for early Christians to explore which ancient philosophical models were most suitable to elucidate their own views. To give an example, Edward Adams has convincingly shown that the author of 2 Peter took fault with a static Platonic cosmology, which encouraged believers to state: "ever since our ancestors died, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Pet. 3:4). Instead, the author regards a Stoic cosmology, which reckons with the fiery destruction of the cosmic elements (3:11–13), as far more compatible with his Christian world-view.[101] This illustrates that from an early stage Christians looked for compatible cosmologies which best fitted their own views. To that end they contrasted existing Graeco-Roman cosmologies. The same issue might underlie a debate within the Pauline school: the cosmology of the author of the Letter to the Ephesians is Stoic in outlook, enabling him to stress the cosmic process; whereas, the cosmology of the

author of the Letter to the Colossians is more Platonizing, in accordance with his wish to stress the current coherence and stability of the cosmos, held together in Christ, its body tied with bonds.[102] In a similar way John, in the opening of his gospel, re-narrates the creation account of Genesis 1–2. John – like Philo of Alexandria before him, and early Christian authors such as Clement of Alexandria after him – understands these opening chapters as the account of a double creation: the first being the creation of the invisible paradigm (supported by the Septuagint translation of Genesis 1:2 as "the earth was *invisible and unformed*"), whereas the second is the subsequent creation of the visible universe. This Platonic understanding becomes apparent when he identifies Christ as "the true light" (1:9; cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 109e), which is the source of all visible, physical light. This application by John of the Platonic notion of the true, intelligible light is recognized by Christian authors such as Origen and Augustine.[103]

The Christian debate about the cosmos became very intense in the second century because of the emergence, within Christianity, of a Gnostic dualism which viewed the cosmos as essentially evil and the product of an inferior malevolent or ignorant creator-god. It is this cosmological dualism that dominates the Christian agenda from the mid-second century onwards. The first signs of this debate within the New Testament writings are the assertion in 1 Timothy 4:4 that "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving," and the emphatic stress in both 1 Timothy 3:16 and 1 John 4:2 that Jesus Christ has appeared "in the flesh."[104] The challenge which Gnosticism posed to both early Christianity and pagan philosophy was in many senses new. As Jaap Mansfeld has argued, despite some limited Greek antecedents of the Gnostic position, this radical dualism – which holds that the world is not good, because there is an evil creator-god – is unprecedented, and "filled a lacuna in the grid of possible options" in Greek cosmology. According to Mansfeld,

> the original Gnostic dualistic impulse cannot be fully derived from Greek antecedents, although, to a certain extent, it may perhaps be explained as a critical response to Greek ideas. ... Enough resemblances of a partial nature, however, can be indicated to make the fact that the Gnostic religion was capable of flourishing in a Graeco-Roman environment somewhat more understandable.[105]

For this reason both (orthodox) Christianity and pagan philosophy were obliged to deal *in extenso* with the emerging Gnostic cosmology.

One of Plotinus's main objections against the Gnostics' radical rejection of the visible cosmos and its complete segregation from the supreme God is his concern that they effectively deny the relation between the supreme God's providence and this world, so that there is no reason to develop an ethics which relates to this world: "this doctrine censures the lord of providence and providence itself still more crudely [than the Epicurean belief that the gods take no thought for this cosmos], and despises all the laws of this world."[106] Plotinus's charge of immorality against the Gnostics is partly correct, as their dualistic doctrine was indeed not only compatible with the extreme of asceticism, at one end of the spectrum, but also with that of antisocial and self-destructive antinomianism, at the other.[107] It is important to note that the church's

polemics against Gnosticism were not a matter of the repression of a minority by an institution but, as Plotinus's attack on the Gnostics shows, rather an engagement with a competing position within the process of the formation of a school. Plotinus views Gnosticism as a distorted form of Platonism.[108]

Historiography

Apart from these competing cosmological views, and the debate as to which of them is compatible with Christianity as a whole, I shall briefly mention another important area of competition between Christians and pagans, the field of historiography. Already Jews such as Josephus felt the need to reply to particular pagan claims, made by Apion and others, that Judaism was irrelevant and lacked a distinguished history. In his *Against Apion*, Josephus drew an alternative history, in which the standing of "barbarian" history, and especially the Jewish type, was defended and portrayed as superior to Greek history.[109] Apion's anti-Semitic historiography, however, was by no means the rule among Greeks, as there were also positive Greek views on the figure of Moses.[110] And the Greek philosopher Numenius accorded the Jews, and Moses in particular, pride of place in the quest for ancient wisdom, the retrieval of which was regarded the objective of ancient philosophy; Plato is none other but Moses talking Attic.[111]

It is this kind of historiographical competition which continues to exist between early Christians and pagans. Celsus, for instance, exhibits the same critical view of Judaism and its breakaway-movement Christianity. Although Celsus states that "there is an ancient doctrine which has existed from the beginning, which has always been maintained by the wisest nations and cities and wise men," he deliberately omits the Jews.[112] He does so, Origen replies, by deviating from the position of Numenius and others.[113] In order to counterbalance Celsus's views, Origen gives multiple examples in which "the antiquity of Moses" is clearly contrasted with that of the Greeks.[114] The latter are regarded as being dependent on Moses for several of their views, which they, however, have often misunderstood. In fact, Origen purports, "Moses was more ancient than Homer" and "is proved to have lived long before the Trojan war."[115] Because "Moses and the prophets ... are not only earlier than Plato but also than Homer and the discovery of writing among the Greeks," it is impossible that they – Moses and the prophets – "misunderstood Plato," as Celsus had suggested. "How could they have heard a man who had not yet been born?" Origen counters.[116] This type of historiography is widespread among early Christian authors and is also found in, for instance, Justin, Tatian, and Clement of Alexandria.[117]

Christianity's competitive nature

All the examples given in this paper provide sufficient proof for the highly competitive, enquiring nature of early Christianity. Its language and ideas were fully inscribed in the Greek discourse, even if, through this competition, Christians developed a critical stance against particular Greek views. For this reason I have reservations about the modern term "Christian apologists," which is applied to Christian authors who engaged fully in debate with their contemporaries. As Wolfram Kinzig notes, "The

modern collective term appears to go back to F. Morel (*Corpus Apologetarum*, 1615) and P. Maran (1742; cf. *Patrologiae Cursus, series Graeca* 6)."[118] But the term carries the connotation of defensiveness, as if this mode of thinking merely applies an apologetic veneer, like an additional coating, onto an underlying Christian faith.[119] The implied suggestion seems to be that this way of reasoning is only a secondary translation of a religious belief into philosophical categories, often brought together in an eclectic way, as long as these categories suit the Christian belief. The term is then applied first and foremost to those who defended Christianity against contemporary pagan attacks: Quadratus, Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Melito, Athenagoras, and Theophilus of Antioch, on the Greek side; Minucius Felix and Tertullian, on the Latin side. And, as Kinzig indicates, in a wider sense also to "later writers such as Hermias, the author of the Epistle to Diognetus, Clement of Alexandria, Ps-Justin, Commodianus, Arnobius, Lactantius, and Firmicus Maternus."[120]

To be sure, there are writings which are clearly meant to respond to particular charges and are in that sense defensive. One could refer, for instance, to the chief representatives of the genre "Against the Nations": Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Arnobius, and his pupil Lactantius. The latter's work, entitled *The Divine Institutes*, was completed in the year of the Edict of Milan (CE 313), the end of Constantine's pagan, pre-Christian era.[121] Yet the label, "Christian apologists," suggests that their reasoning was not an authentic expression of an integral Christian world-view, as if it was only applied to render Christianity acceptable to the elite. I agree with Chadwick that apologists such as Justin

> must be asserted to have some measure of genuinely independent status as a thinker. It is a naïve mistake to suppose that because the diffused philosophy of his time was eclectic ... , Justin is *merely* reflecting this popular synthesis. ... Precisely what one means by the misty term "eclecticism" it is never very easy to say. There is no philosophy that does not draw together elements from diverse sources.[122]

As John Dillon has pointed out, the term eclecticism – defined as "an approach to philosophy which consists in the selection and amalgamation of elements of different systems of thought" – "has been much misused in relation to ancient philosophy, however, little account being taken of the historical perspectives of the individuals concerned."[123] This despite the fact that "all these men considered themselves faithful adherents of one school or another, and as merely utilizing formulations developed in another school for the elucidation of their own positions."[124] Similarly, with regard to Origen, Chadwick reminds us that the "penetration of his thought by Platonism is no merely external veneer of apologetic. Platonic ways of thinking about God and the soul are necessary to him if he is to give an intelligible account of his Christian beliefs."[125]

It would be better then to drop the term "Christian apologists" altogether and to recognize that in the Graeco-Roman period, Christianity profiled itself as a competitor on the religio-philosophical market, confident of being able to show its distinct added value.[126] That the nature of this market was highly competitive may be clear from

the descriptions above, but also comes to the fore particularly vividly in the second-century belletrist Lucian's portrayal of the daily competition between philosophers, pseudo-philosophers, Christians, and religious entrepreneurs. Lucian operated in the context of the Second Sophistic, and earned his living as an itinerant lecturer on literary and philosophical themes.[127] In his eighty works, he shows himself to be a lively and important commentator on his cultural and religious environment. He reveals that Christianity was perceived by pagans as a competitor. According to Lucian, for example, Christ himself was a sophist (if a crucified, unsuccessful one) and he mentions that Peregrinus, a philosophical convert to Christianity for some period of his life, is styled by the Christians "the new Socrates."[128] At the same time, Lucian puts this into the general picture of a competition which is ongoing in the public domain. Peregrinus, for instance, converts again to Cynic philosophy, and becomes an adherent of Heracles. His biography shows how pagans could switch their allegiance from Christ to Heracles; both demigods, as we shall see in the last section below, attracted much attention.

Lucian's detailed depictions of relations between religious and philosophical movements make his work an invaluable source for studying the daily life of Christians within antiquity. Lucian also likens Christians to atheists and Epicureans because of their refusal to participate in the cults. In *Alexander the False Prophet*, for instance, he portrays the polemical stance of this charlatan against atheists, regardless of whether they were Christians or Epicurean philosophers:

> When at last many sensible men, recovering, as it were, from profound intoxication, combined against Alexander, especially all the followers of Epicurus ... , he issued a promulgation designed to scare them, saying that Pontus was full of Atheists and Christians who had the hardihood to utter the vilest abuse of him.
>
> (Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet* 25)

This gives a very vivid picture of how Christians could be conceived of as atheist philosophers. When Alexander established a mystery cult, according to Lucian, "On the first day ... , there was a proclamation, worded as follows: 'If any atheist or Christian or Epicurean has come to spy upon the rites, let him be off'."[129]

Lucian himself is reported to have converted to Epicurean philosophy. This raises interesting points. On the one hand, Lucian is very critical about Christians.[130] On the other hand, he shows no hesitation in linking Christians with Epicureans, to whom he himself belonged, and he indicates that both were equally resented by a religious entrepreneur such as Alexander the False Prophet. Also, even if critical about Christians, he still treats them as counterfeit Cynics.[131] In other words, even in portraying them as pseudo-Cynics, Lucian still depicts them in philosophical terms. Lucian's works, thus, provide a deep insight into the dialectics that operate between competing religio-philosophical groups in antiquity.

In the present introduction to second- and third-century Christian thought, it is important to emphasize that this full and successful engagement of Christianity in

the daily competition on the religio-philosophical market, reinforced by the deep impact made by the Christian martyrs, seems to have led to the gradual growth of Christianity, up to an estimated 10 per cent of the population of the Roman Empire around CE 300, at the end of the period before Constantine the Great.[132] Christianity was clearly already on the rise before Constantine. His conversion was probably not so much the cause – as the traditional perspective on Constantine would have it – but rather the result of the growth of Christianity.[133] Such is the view of ancient historians who represent the new perspective on Constantine, such as Tim Barnes, Robin Lane Fox, and the late Keith Hopkins.[134]

This all seems to confirm the validity of the economics-of-religion approach, as undertaken by the sociologist Rodney Stark. His theoretical views are also applicable to antiquity and the rise of Christianity in the first three centuries. Stark defines a religious economy in terms of a "market" (the adherents), "firms" (the organizations which seek to attract adherents), and the "products" of religious culture they offer. The basic principle of his theory is that "competition among religious organizations in any society stimulates effort, thus increasing the overall level of religious commitment and causing the demise of faiths lacking sufficient market appeal."[135]

Before I briefly summarize what we have seen in terms of this economics of religion theory, I wish to point out that the perspective of competition is not just an outsider's view, but that some "insiders," who lived in antiquity, were also aware of the usefulness of such a perspective for understanding what was going on. In the period immediately after Constantine, the pagan philosopher Themistius, political adviser and spokesman of several Christian emperors in the East, argued "that it was appropriate to encourage healthy competition between people of different religious persuasions, to avoid falling into indolence and lethargy,"[136] so that all men should compete in virtue.[137] The importance of the concept of competition in religio-philosophical matters is thus fully justified, both from a modern theoretical outsider's perspective and from a contemporary insider's perspective.

It does indeed seem to be the case that "competition among religious organizations in any society stimulates effort," and that this applies equally to antiquity. As a result, "the overall level of religious commitment [increased] and caus[ed] the demise of faiths lacking sufficient market appeal." As we have seen, from the outset Christianity became engrained in the networks of antiquity because its social appearance matched the organizational form in which the religio-philosophical market was organized: the form of voluntary organizations, distinguished from the State, and of the philosophical schools. The added competitive value of early Christianity on the market was its radical monotheism, its anti-sacrificial nature, its universalism and concomitant criticism of localized religion, and its development of an ethical religion. Whereas ethics was mainly an issue for philosophers, and cults involved no moral teaching, Christianity offered the ancient world a logical, non-ritualistic, ethical religion.[138] This ethical nature of Christianity seems to be linked with its founder and the way he was understood, as I shall argue in the final section. As we shall see, despite heavy philosophical "upgrading," the mythological figure of Heracles remained too ambiguous to prove a successful competitor against Christ.

The competition between Christ and Heracles

Christianity's role as a competitor on the religio-philosophical market of the first three centuries can be nicely illustrated by the rivalry between Christ and Heracles. I shall first briefly narrate the myth of Heracles' life in the version which the second-century-CE author, Pseudo-Apollodorus, gives in his *Library*.[139] Heracles is born as a demigod because Zeus, after deceiving Heracles' human mother by assuming the likeness of her husband, fathers Heracles. The goddess Hera, Zeus's wife, desires the destruction of Zeus's bastard son. She drives Heracles mad so that he kills his children, whom he had by Megara. Heracles condemns himself to exile, and on his request receives from the oracle at Delphi the order "to dwell in Tiryns, serving Eurystheus for twelve years and to perform the ten labours imposed on him, and so, she said, when the tasks were accomplished, he would be immortal."[140] And so Eurystheus sets Heracles impossible tasks, such as bringing the skin of the Nemean lion, an invincible beast, killing the Lernaean hydra, a nine-headed water snake, and carrying out the dung of the cattle of Augeas in a single day. Heracles, however, fulfils them all. His labours bring him over the whole world, and on the Caucasus he frees Prometheus, after shooting the eagle that daily devoured his liver, which was renewed each night. After the successful completion of his labours, Heracles does indeed become immortal when he is accidentally killed by his wife Deianira, who smears his tunic with poison which she believes to be a love-potion, but which corrodes Heracles' skin. Tortured by the poisoned robe, Heracles proceeds to Mount Oeta, constructs a pyre and has it kindled: "While the pyre was burning, it is said that a cloud passed under Heracles and with a peal of thunder wafted him up to heaven. Thereafter he obtained immortality."[141]

During the centuries the Heracles myth was appropriated by Greek and Roman philosophers, who interpreted it in an allegorical, philosophical way. Plato, in the *Euthydemus*, his educational manifesto, already understands Heracles in such a way, and portrays him as the one who defeats each of the heads of the hydra, "that female sophist who was so clever that she sent forth many heads of debate in place of each one that was cut off."[142] This portrayal of Heracles as a philosopher who engages in battle with the sophists also occurs in the Greek orator and popular philosopher, Dio Chrysostom (CE *c.* 40/50 to after 110), who puts a eulogy to Heracles in the mouth of the fourth-century-BCE Cynic philosopher, Diogenes. The latter is said to remind the visitors to the Isthmian games of the far more impressive moral endeavours of Heracles, the true athlete, who completed his labours in sorry circumstances, unnoticed by the masses.[143] As a true philosopher, Heracles turns against the deception of public opinion by freeing Prometheus from its ruinous effects: "And Prometheus, whom I take to have been a sort of sophist, he [i.e. Heracles] found being destroyed by popular opinion; for his liver swelled and grew whenever he was praised and shrivelled again when he was censured. So he took pity on him."[144] Heracles himself is pictured as very concerned not to appeal to public opinion, but to combat it: "to avoid creating the opinion that he did only impressive and mighty deeds, he went and removed and cleaned away the dung in the Augean stable, that immense accumulation of many

years. For he considered that he ought to fight stubbornly and war against opinion as much as against wild beasts and wicked men."[145]

This positive, philosophical image of Heracles is shared by many Cynic and Stoic philosophers. Cynics regard Heracles as "an interpreter of truth and free speech."[146] And Stoics such as Cicero, Seneca, and Epictetus emphasize the deeds which Heracles performed "pro salute gentium," for the salvation and well-being of humankind,[147] and exhort people to follow his example.[148] Unlike Alexander the Great, according to Seneca, Heracles "conquered nothing for himself; he traversed the world, not in coveting, but in deciding what to conquer, a foe of the wicked, a defender of the good, a peacemaker on land and sea."[149] Characteristic of him, in Epictetus's view, is his obeisance to God's will:

> how many acquaintances and friends did he have with him as he went up and down through the whole word? Nay, he had no dearer friend than God. That is why he was believed to be a son of God, and was. It was therefore in obedience to his will that he went about clearing away wickedness and lawlessness.
>
> (Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.16.44–45)[150]

It is exactly this point, the extreme perseverance in fulfilling God's will and the accomplishment of deeply moral deeds, that provides a point of comparison between Heracles and Christ. According to David Aune, already within the New Testament writings Christian authors show themselves to be aware of this parallel, and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews seems to be drawing on this philosophical interpretation of the Heracles myth when he emphasizes with regard to Christ that, "Although he was a Son [of God], he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8). As Aune concludes, "the similarities between Heracles imagery and the Christology of Hebrews ... suggest that many of the important and vital functions attributed to Heracles as a Hellenistic saviour figure were understood by some early Christians as applicable to Jesus to an even greater extent than they were to Heracles."[151]

This competition between Christ and Heracles was also noticed on the pagan side. Celsus, in his writing against the Christians, puts forward the irritated, and somewhat desperate question of why Christians are not satisfied with Heracles. It would have been better, Celsus tells the Christians, "to have addressed your attentions to some other man among those who have died noble deaths and are sufficiently distinguished to have a myth about them like the gods," and then holds up Heracles as an example.[152] Celsus's question as to why Heracles is no successful alternative to Christ can probably best be answered by reference to the ambiguous portrayal of Heracles, despite the philosophers' attempts to interpret his myth in a philosophical manner. It is no surprise when Origen answers Celsus by pointing to negative features in these myths:

> Since he [i.e. Celsus] refers to Heracles, let him show us records of his teaching, and give an explanation of his undignified slavery with Omphale. Let him show whether a man was worthy of divine honour who took the ox of a farmer by force like a thief, and feasted on it, delighting in the curses

> which the farmer swore at him while he was eating, so that even to this day the daemon of Heracles is said to receive the sacrifice with certain curses.
>
> (Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.54)

Not only the Christians, but also the pagan mythographers, the poets and comedians,[153] and, despite pagan philosophers' idealization of him, they too were aware of the darker side of Heracles,[154] for instance when he impulsively killed the three sons of Eurystheus because he himself received a smaller portion at dinner. The troubling ambiguity of Heracles becomes clear when Athenaeus, having narrated this last incident, remarks: "Well, then, we have no such temper ourselves, though we are emulators of Heracles in all things."[155] Sometimes the philosophers make an unconvincing attempt at defending Heracles' behaviour. Epictetus, for instance, commenting on the trail of children engendered by Heracles during his travels around the world, says:

> He was even in the habit of marrying when he saw fit, and begetting children, and deserting his children, without either groaning or yearning for them, or as though leaving them to be orphans. It was because he knew that no human being is an orphan, but all men have ever and constantly the Father, who cares for them.
>
> (Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.14–16)

It is this ambiguity of Heracles' character to which early Christians call attention in their competition with the pagans. On the one hand, many Christians, such as Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, are not blind to Heracles' bright side and are willing to acknowledge the similarities between him and Christ.[156] On the other hand, however, they emphasize his dark side. Some of them, such as Athenagoras and Tertullian, also referred explicitly to negative pagan views on Heracles in support of their own criticism.[157] Others compared his positive and negative features.[158]

It is noteworthy that among these fierce critics of Heracles there are also a number of pagan intellectuals who converted to Christianity. Justin, for instance, accused Heracles of merely mimicking the truth.[159] Clement of Alexandria, too, criticizes the figure of Heracles, points out his unethical behaviour, and concludes, in allusion to Homer: "It is not, then, without reason that the poets call him a cruel wretch and a nefarious scoundrel."[160] A similar opponent of Heracles is Arnobius of Sicca, a teacher of rhetoric who suddenly converted to Christianity at the end of the third century, and within a few years, wrote his *Against the Heathen* at the request of his bishop.[161] His pupil Lactantius, too, is very critical of Heracles. Lactantius lost his position as a teacher of rhetoric in Nicomedia when he converted to Christianity, and after Diocletian's persecution of the Christians in 303 he composed, among other writings, the *Divine Institutes* (303–13). This work was framed as a reply to attacks on Christianity by the Neo-Platonist philosopher Sossianus Hierocles, who was a major inspiration behind the persecution and the author of an anti-Christian disputation.[162] The heat of this confrontation is mirrored in Lactantius's attitude towards Heracles in

his *Divine Institutes*, when he makes the following observation: "Heracles is renowned for his virtues; he is seen as a sort of Africanus [the conqueror of Hannibal] among the gods. Yet his rapes and adulteries and other sexual exploits fouled the very earth that his travels are said to have cleansed."[163]

In these passages by pagan converts to Christianity, the fierce competition between Christ and Heracles is evident. The widespread coverage of this topic in early Christian literature is also noteworthy. Gradually Heracles lost ground. As Marcel Simon puts it,

> Here again we hit upon the drama of late paganism. ... The inability of Heracles ... to hold the first rank for any length of time simply reflects the inability of the old religion which – still partly caught in the paralysing trammels of polytheism – cannot reorganise and rejuvenate itself around a central figure. ... After having in some sort opened the way to Christianity by lending it a vocabulary and some concepts to define itself, paganism was reduced to a pale copy of the rival cult.[164]

Or as Karl Galinsky phrases it, Heracles "became paganism's last, desperate choice to head off the appeal of Christianity."[165]

It seems that what was decisive for Heracles' defeat was the fact that his moral image was too ambiguous to allow for an ethics to be based on him. Myths, as Christian authors let their pagan public know, are not simply an innocent pastime for the authors who write about them, but have an impact on society. Tertullian gives an ironic description of the religious flavour of the gladiatorial games in the amphitheatres, where criminals are forced to re-enact the myths and identify with the gods, including Heracles:

> You are, of course, possessed of a more religious spirit in the show of your gladiators, when your gods dance, with equal zest, over the spilling of human blood, (and) over those filthy penalties which are at once their proof and plot for executing your criminals, or else (when) your criminals are punished personating the gods themselves. ... A wretch burnt alive has personated Heracles.
>
> (Tertullian, *To the Heathen* 1.10)

Kathleen Coleman has shown how these "fatal charades" were particularly popular in the first and second centuries CE.[166] Similarly, according to Lactantius, the widespread popularity of the myths of Heracles and others, in the plays in the theatre and in popular songs, is bad for morals:

> How will they curb their sex-drive when they venerate Jupiter, Heracles, Bacchus, Apollo and all those others whose rapes and adulteries against men and women are not just known to scholars but are acted out in theatres and put into songs, so that everybody knows them all the better? How can they

> possibly be just people amid all this? Even if they were born good, they would be brought up to injustice, precisely by those gods. To please the god you worship you need what you know makes him happy and joyful. Thus it is that a god shapes the life of his worshippers after the nature of his own spirit; the most devoted worship that exists is imitation.
>
> (Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* 5.10)

The above case-study on Heracles touches on the general link between the myths and lack of morals. This relation was also suggested by pagan authors. Philostratus, for instance, puts the following words in the mouth of Agathion, the purer lookalike of Heracles: "the wise Greeks were doing an immoral thing when they listened with delight to the criminal deeds of the houses of Pelops and Labdacus; for when myths are not discredited they may be the counsellors of evil deeds."[167] In a similar mode Lucian describes the wish of Menippus to descend into Hades to find out the right way to live, because he is perplexed that the myths of his boyhood appear to be contradicted by the laws which he is expected to uphold as an adult:

> While I was a boy, when I read in Homer and Hesiod about wars and quarrels, not only of the demigods but of the gods themselves, and besides about their amours and assaults and abductions ... , I thought that all these things were right, and I felt an uncommon impulsion toward them. But when I came of age, I found that the law contradicted the poets and forbade adultery, quarrelling, and theft.
>
> (Lucian, *Menippus* 3)

Or, as Lucian puts it in a different writing: "The general herd, whom philosophers call the laity, trust Homer and Hesiod and the other mythmakers in these matters, and take their poetry for a law unto themselves."[168] It is this rift between the philosophers and the laity which Christians claimed to bridge. They fully engaged with the philosophical and religious forces of their time on the religio-philosophical market of antiquity. The secret of their added competitive value was the unambiguous trustworthiness and moral character of Christ.

Further reading

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R. M. Berchman, *Porphyry Against the Christians*, Leiden: Brill, 2005. (Important anti-Christian polemic.)

A. Bowen and P. Garnsey (trans., intro., and notes), *Lactantius: Divine Institutes*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003. (Very important text of a pagan teacher of rhetoric who converted to Christianity.)

G. R. Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of Its Development from the Stoics to Origen*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. (Shows common discourse between pagan and Christian philosophers.)

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Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen, Oxford: Clarendon, 1966. (Sensitive introduction to three Christian key figures.)

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G. H. van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context: The Image of God, Assimilation to God, and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, and Early Christianity*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008. (Detailed study about the common discourse on man in ancient Judaism, early Christianity and Graeco-Roman philosophy.)

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F. Young, L. Ayres, and A. Louth (assistant editor A. Casiday) (eds), *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. (The necessary complement to *The Cambridge History of Christianity*.)

Notes

1 I wish to devote this piece to the memory of Michael Frede (ob. 11 August 2007), out of gratitude for his inspirational guidance in the subject matter of this essay. All flawed interpretations remain my responsibility.

2 See, e.g., Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.37 and *The Life* 67, on the Greek residents of Tiberias.

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14 J. N. Bremmer, "'Religion', 'Ritual' and the Opposition 'Sacred vs. Profane'," in F. Graf (ed.), *Ansichten griechischer Rituale*, Stuttgart/Leipzig: Teubner, 1998, pp. 9–32.
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16 Bremmer, "'Religion', 'Ritual' and the Opposition," p. 10.
17 L. Alexander, "Paul and the Hellenistic Schools: The Evidence of Galen," in T. Engberg-Pedersen (ed.), *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, pp. 60–83. Cf. A. D. Nock, "Conversion to Philosophy," in *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, London: Oxford University Press, 1933, pp. 164–86.
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34 Alexander, "Paul and the Hellenistic Schools," p. 82.
35 L. Alexander, "IPSE DIXIT: Citation of Authority in Paul and in the Jewish and Hellenistic Schools," in T. Engberg-Pedersen (ed.), *Paul Beyond the Judaism-Hellenism Divide*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001, pp. 103–27; cf. S. Mason, "*Philosophiai*: Graeco-Roman, Judean and Christian," in Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations*, pp. 31–58.
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45 The phrase "assembly of God" only occurs in 2 Esdras 23:1. The phrase "assembly of the Lord" does occur seven times in the LXX, notably in Deuteronomy, but this phrase is not applied in the NT.
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47 See further Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.5; 8.74–75.
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55 Diodorus of Sicily, *The Library of History* 5.46.3; cf. 5.64.2.
56 Diodorus of Sicily, *The Library of History* 5.77.4. On "philanthropy," in Titus 3:4, see also C. Spicq, "La philanthropie hellénistique, vertu divine et royale (à propos de *Tit.* III,4)," *Studia Theologica* 12, 1958, pp. 169–91; cf. C. Spicq, *Notes de lexicographie néo-testamentaire*, vol. 2, Fribourg/Göttingen: Éditions Universitaires/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978, pp. 922–7; R. Le Déaut, ΦΙΛΑΝΘΡΩΠΙΑ dans la littérature grecque jusqu'au Nouveau Testament (Tite III, 4)," in E. Tisserant (ed.), *Mélanges Eugène Tisserant*, vol. 1, Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1964, pp. 255–94; A. Pelletier, "Ce n'est pas la sagesse, mais le Dieu sauveur qui aime l'humanité," *Revue Biblique* 87, 1980, pp. 397–403.

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63 Plutarch, *A Pleasant Life Impossible* 1102A.
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